

CUSTOMER PERCEPTIONS OF THE ALBERGO DIFFUSO CONCEPT: WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE IN TERMS OF SERVICE EXCELLENCE?

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This research introduces an innovative model of sustainable tourism called “Albergo Diffuso,” a “made in Italy” concept of hospitality that exploits tangible and intangible local resources and is oriented toward the revitalization and recovery of the country’s existing heritage. In the study, 130 customer reviews were analyzed to understand the sentiments and perceptions of customers regarding the Albergo Diffuso principle and its services in practice. Specific attention was paid to evaluating services that had garnered negative customer reviews to identify potential new strengths and aspects of the approach that could be implemented in the future. The main findings confirm that, overall, customers who particularly appreciate this alternative model of hospitality value authenticity over comfort. Additionally, the fact that the Albergo Diffuso scheme is introducing new business models that are completely different from the traditional ones is very much appreciated from a managerial perspective.

Key words: Albergo Diffuso; Sustainability; Customer perception; Customer satisfaction; Sentiment analysis

Introduction

The demand for tourism services offering authentic holidays has increased rapidly in recent years, which in turn has transformed the concept of hospitality (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Seyhmus, 2007). In particular, a new generation of tourists is seeking authenticity (Cohen, 1988; Kidd, 2011; MacCannell, 1973; Peterson, 2005; Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Salamone, 1997) and perceives holidays as

an opportunity to learn and to increase their knowledge of the culture of the places to which they travel, (Xu & Tavitiyaman, 2018). In addition, the rapid evolution of demand has pushed the tourism sector to innovate and to meet the requests of the most demanding customers through the generation of inventive and higher quality services (Orlandini, Vallone, De Toni, & Cecchetti, 2012) that are sustainability oriented (Costa, 2001; Potts & Harrill, 1998; Sheehan & Presenza, 2013; Sirakaya, Jamal,

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& Choi, 2001; Vallone, Orlandini, & Checchetti, 2013) by implementing novel business models that have not yet been formally defined.

New forms of hospitality, such as the so-called “Albergo Diffuso” scheme, have consequently arisen, offering the opportunity to visit and appreciate a range of destinations off the usual tourist track and enjoy their distinctive characteristics. Under the Albergo Diffuso model, tourists can stay in rooms or apartments individually located in different buildings within a hamlet (Dall’Ara & Esposito, 2005), and thereby feel more integrated (as *quasiresidents*) with the local population who live there, instead of staying in a traditional hotel from which such integration with the local residents is *a priori* limited or not possible (Sirakaya-Turk, Ingram, & Harrill, 2008).

Therefore, understanding the “voice of customers” is becoming a key strategic asset with which to evaluate the business success of new models of hospitality, especially in terms of services offered. Certainly, a poor understanding of customer opinions, regarding aspects such as the quality of the facilities and the cost, has been found to negatively influence a firm’s performance and service provision, particularly when it comes to customer satisfaction management (Jiao & Chen, 2006). Accordingly, in this new business landscape, capturing the sentiments of tourists (customer perceptions) offers an important starting point for the generation of new business models.

However, despite the dramatic changes in the demands of tourists, very little research exists at the intersection between tourism management and customer perceptions with respect to the Albergo Diffuso concept. For this reason, the main aim of the present study is to capture the sentiments (perceptions) of customers regarding the innovative services provided by this scheme. Particular attention is paid to the differences (if any exist) between this model and those of the traditional forms of hospitality (i.e., the “vertical hotel”), as well as on the contextualization of services currently attracting negative customer perceptions that could develop (if properly improved) into some of the main strengths of this new model of hospitality. Thus, the research questions that will be addressed in this research are as follows: How do customers perceive the services offered by an Albergo Diffuso? How do the services offered through the Albergo Diffuso

approach differ from those available through the traditional model of hospitality?

In the next section, the theoretical background of the study is introduced and the central research question is proposed. Thereafter, the data collection approach and research methodology are explained. The subsequent section presents and discusses the main results of the research. Finally, implications of the findings, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research conclude this article.

Theoretical Background

The idea of an Albergo Diffuso comes from Italy, as do the first experiences of its application and its related legislative system. The concept appeared initially in 1982, as part of a pilot project planned by Leonardo Zanier and launched in *Comeglians*, a commune in the province of Udine in the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. In fact, the first conceptualization of an *albergo diffuso* appeared in the late 1970s, when it became necessary to restructure and redevelop, for residential purposes, the villages that became uninhabited as a consequence of an earthquake that took place in Carnia (which is also in the province of Udine) in 1976. In these first attempts to create an *albergo diffuso*, the main purpose was to use empty buildings and abandoned homes to animate city centers, and to enhance tourist sites by marketing them specifically in relation to the spirit of the place. However, despite these early attempts, an *albergo diffuso* was still no different than a traditional hotel.

Only in 1989 was there was a big step forward in defining the “Albergo Diffuso” concept as it is known today. This comprised a feasibility plan connected to a tourism project in San Leo (in the Province of Rimini), which introduced, for the first time, the concept of a “horizontal hotel.” The latter was designed as a facility unit that catered to people interested in staying in an urban context of value, in contact with the locals, while also having the luxury of normal hotel services. The concept was developed in Montefeltro and completed in Sardinia as part of the “Tourism Development Plan of the Mountain Community Marghine Planargia” in Nuoro, Sardinia, in 1995. This model would become a significant reference point for the “Albergo Diffuso” later scheme.

The model was subsequently applied as a development system for apartments and houses, replacing the unified management of hotel services, and soon became deeply rooted in local tradition and in turn arousing great interest—particularly from a managerial standpoint. Furthermore, the international press also started paying attention to the phenomenon, with *The New York Times Style Magazine*, on September 20, 2008, specifically using the Italian term “Albergo Diffuso” as a brand. A growing number of entrepreneurs started to consider the Albergo Diffuso as an innovative model of hospitality and as a new business approach, and several related associations were established, such as the Associazione Nazionale Alberghi Diffusi (National Association of Alberghi Diffusi; see www.alberghidiffusi.it), with the mission to promote and support the development of the Albergo Diffuso concept in Italy, and the Associazione Borghi Autentici d’Italia (Association of Authentic Hamlets of Italy).

Today, the Albergo Diffuso is a model of hospitality characterized by a unitary management, which offers hospitality to its “temporary residents” in several separate buildings located in a small village or hamlet (see Fig. 1). It is what is known as a “horizontal” hotel system, or an integrated system

of touristic offerings linked to the local community that addresses the needs of a new generation of tourists eager to immerse themselves in the local culture and to share and participate in local traditions, tastes, trades, and other events. Specifically, the model is based on housing units located in several buildings close together in a small village, within a living community (Dall’Ara & Esposito, 2005).

It is becoming a sustainable model of hospitality of interest in other countries as well—for example, in Croatia (Pavia & Flori i , 2017), Albania (Liçaj, 2014), Romania (Avram & Zarrilli, 2012), Spain (Di Clemente, Hernández Mogollón, & Campón Cerro, 2014), and South Africa (Giampiccoli, Saayman, & Jugmohan, 2016). However, despite the importance of the Albergo Diffuso concept from a managerial perspective, a very limited amount of research into it has been developed by scholars to date. Previous studies have paid attention to the conceptualization of the idea (Confalonieri, 2011; Dall’Ara, 2010; Del Chiappa, 2012; Panicia, Pecjlaner, & Valeri, 2007), mainly by providing a qualitative framework in respect of its main characteristics as well as its environmental, cultural, social, and economical implications (Camillo, Presenza, & Di Virgilio, 2015; Quattrociochi & Montella, 2013), with little focus on the tourist perceptions of the services



Figure 1. Albergo Diffuso of Apricale (region Liguria).

offered by this new model of hospitality (Vallone & Veglio, 2014). Others contributors have highlighted the fact of the development and the competitiveness of small rural destinations occurring without local identity being altered (Paniccia et al., 2007; Pavia & Flori i , 2017), or have emphasized the evolution of the rural tourist destinations (De Montis, Ledda, Ganciu, Serra, & De Montis, 2015).

The Albergo Diffuso can be viewed as a model of sustainable tourism that focuses on the tangible local resources, such as cultural heritage, agriculture, and the traditional handicrafts, as well as intangible local resources, encompassing traditions, history, and social networks (Avram & Zarrilli, 2012; Sheehan & Presenza, 2013; Vallone et al., 2013). In addition, Italian tourists appreciate the concept of the Albergo Diffuso, perceiving positively some of the peculiarities related to the characteristics of the model, including the variety and richness of places in which the accommodation is located, compared to some foreign tourists who seem not to necessarily understand the positive characteristics of this new model of hospitality (Vallone & Veglio, 2018). Moreover, Italian tourists affirm that the services offered by the Albergo Diffuso scheme are of a high quality and attain points of excellence (Vallone & Veglio, 2014). It is also seen as a model of sustainable development oriented toward preserving artistic heritage by using the tangible and intangible resources of an area (Mondelli & La Rocca, 2006; Vignali, 2011) as well as being focused on the revitalization and redevelopment of deprived areas (Romolini, Fissi, & Gori, 2017) with a high potential of requalification.

Thus, it has been determined that the Albergo Diffuso is a model of sustainable development that aims at the exploitation of local resources, both tangible (cultural heritage, agriculture and handicrafts, small businesses) and intangible (traditions, knowledge, and social ties), by satisfying several goals:

- *economic prosperity*—it is oriented to the revitalization and recovery of existing assets;
- *equity and social cohesion*—it improves the quality of life of local communities and offers visitors satisfying experiences while minimizing pollution and environmental degradation; and
- the “Albergo Diffuso” can contribute to high potential for *growth and job generation* (Vallone et al., 2013).

Consequently, as previously noted, the Albergo Diffuso represents an attractive form of authentic experience because it promotes heritage and is oriented to the recovery of a locality’s cultural identity and to the revival of traditional events. In such schemes, an inner lobby or a gathering area dedicated to the reception desk and other technical aspects will have the purpose of informing customers about activities in the territory. There must be furnishings of local art and traditions near the site. The urban center must be distinguished not only as a strong vocation, but also as a lively welcoming community, promoting local events related to traditions, quality local products, and the environment. Ultimately, the Albergo Diffuso model allows customers to feel like they are part of the community (Giampiccoli et al., 2016; Dall’Ara, 2010), even though the different units scattered across a village might have different owners (Vallone et al., 2013).

Research Methodology

A manual sentiment analysis was developed in order to realize the research goals. The original database comprised 271 customer reviews collected from the travel and accommodation website Booking.com from 2016 to 2018 regarding an Albergo Diffuso located in the north of Italy in a representative hamlet. The total amount of customer reviews studied was equal to 130, as 141 customers did not write a personal opinion of their stay. In particular, different groups of services attracting both positive and negative reviews were identified to understand the feelings of customers regarding the offer of innovative services not provided by “traditional hotels.” Specifically, we looked for occurrences of specific sentiment words or phrases to judge whether a customer expressed a positive or negative opinion on a given service offered.

Three main reasons justify the research design and methodology applied in this study. First, the data collected in Booking.com guaranteed high-quality levels. Customers can write a review only after they have made the relevant payment and/or after having stayed in the accommodation. Second, the online customer reviews are a convenient and increasingly important source of information about customer requirements, product features, service features, and responses, and as such are used by product developers,

service developers, customers, and researchers alike (Hu & Liu, 2004; Wei, Chen, Yang, & Yang, 2006). This fact is particularly true in the tourism sector, where the satisfaction of customers' desires represents one of the primary means of achieving a leading position in the global market (Zhang & Dellarocas, 2006). In addition, online customer reviews are written in colloquial language (unstructured text), representing a powerful source of information in understanding the real feelings or perceptions of customers. Third, research on sentiment analysis is still a relatively new in business studies (Kongthon, Angkawattanawit, Sangkeettrakarn, Palingoon, & Haruechaiyasak, 2010), and it is performed at either the document level (Dave, Lawrence, & Pennock, 2003; Pang, Lee, & Vaithyanathan, 2002; Turney, 2002) or the sentence level (Hu & Liu, 2004; Wiebe & Riloff, 2005). However, while it is useful in capturing the real sentiment of the customer, sentiment analysis does not elicit underlying information such as, for instance, the main preferences or otherwise of customers (Carenini, Ng, & Zwart, 2005; Gamon, Aue, Corston-Oliver, & Ringger, 2005; Hu & Liu, 2004), which would allow a clear representation of both the specific perceptions and the general levels of satisfaction of a given group of customers. Therefore, despite the limited amount of customer reviews available on Booking.com between 2016 and 2018 applying to the context of our study, we consider it as a methodological approach to be powerful, original, and innovative in capturing customers' perceptions in the tourism sector, in which the big data revolution is changing the traditional business models based on tangible products and/or services instead of intangible services.

Empirical Findings

Figure 2 shows the overall customer satisfaction results related to the main services provided by an Albergo Diffuso: 39.31% of customers considered the Albergo Diffuso excellent in terms of the quality of the services promoted, while 39.12% of customers were highly satisfied with the services offered. Conversely, 3.84% of customers were not satisfied with the services provided and 1.28% of customers defined the quality of the services provided as poor. It is important to note that "neutral" customer reviews—such as, for instance,

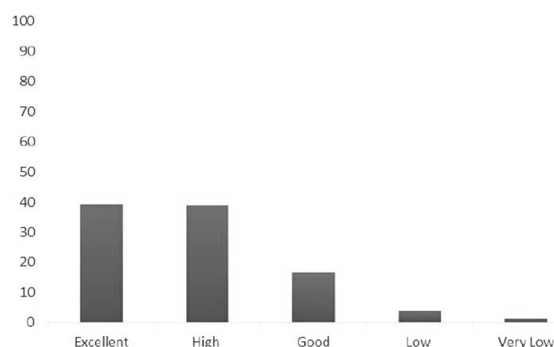


Figure 2. Overall customer satisfaction.

"medieval village," "traditional mountain village architecture," "uncomfortable location," "scattered rooms," "fantastic village but uncomfortable for people more than 58 years old," and "quiet hotel"—have been removed from the analysis because they reflected both the morphological characteristics of the place in which the Albergo Diffuso is located and its organizational structure (i.e., horizontal rather than vertical).

Tables 1 and 2 show the positive and negative perceptions of customers related to the main services offered by the Albergo Diffuso, respectively. The concept of "Albergo Diffuso" can be seen to be very much appreciated by customers, and this emphasizes, once again, how this innovative scheme is leading the way in the generation of new business models in the tourism sector.

Table 1 highlights the services particularly appreciated by customers. For example, it was noted that "the staff [team] is very friendly, nice, and helpful with customers." The rooms should be perceived to be very original as well as beautiful by reflecting the morphological characteristics of the place in which

Table 1

Services with Positive Customers Polarity

Services With Positive Polarity	Relative Frequency
Friendly, nice, and helpful staff	43.85%
Beautiful rooms	23.85%
Comfortable rooms	14.62%
Original rooms	35.38%
Clean rooms	13.85%
Good breakfast	25.38%
Excellent breakfast	38.46%

Table 2
Services With Negative Customer Polarity

Services With Negative Polarity	Relative Frequency
Inadequate rooms facilities	37.69%
Small room	10.00%
Misleading advertisement	7.69%
Small bathroom	6.15%
Inadequate breakfast facilities	5.38%
Expensive hotel	4.62%
Parking problems	4.62%
Expensive luggage transport service	4.62%
Administrative problems	3.85%
Scarce rooms cleaning	3.85%

the Albergo Diffuso is situated. In addition, the decoration of the rooms should generate unique experiences in the minds of tourists, creating an amazing environment never seen before. These rooms might be sometimes uncomfortable, due to their location, exposition, and typology of furniture, but this point cannot be seen as negative because customers who decide to stay in an Albergo Diffuso need to know in advance that the comfort is not the foremost goal of this model of hospitality. Instead, it seeks to provide “innovative” services, such as friendly staff, integration between guests and the local community (as *quasiresidents*), participation by the tourists in cultural and artistic events within the village, a direct management approach (e.g., the development of a good relationship between the owner of the Albergo Diffuso and the customers), traditional rooms (original furniture), and excellent homemade food. Customers in our study very much appreciated the quality of the breakfast and particularly the homemade foods, both sweet (lavender biscuits) and savory (pumpkin cake), by reporting that the Albergo Diffuso experience is like diving into the past. These first results highlight once again how tourism demands are

changing and demonstrate the decline of the vertical model of hospitality based on tangible services.

Tables 2 and 3 detail some inconsistencies, such as inadequate room facilities (no air conditioning or Wi-Fi connection, insufficient ventilation, dampness, and small bathrooms), poor breakfast facilities (small room and spread-out location), administrative problems (lengthy check-in procedure and booking problems), and misleading advertisements at the time of booking (e.g., the photos of the rooms were not representative of the reality). In particular, customers defined the rooms as beautiful but has having inadequate facilities. Breakfast was deemed very good in terms of both quality and the variety of the foods, but the size of the room was considered small and too far from the other rooms. The staff team was thought to be very friendly and qualified, yet some administrative problems were experienced in the structure of the check-in process. The luggage transport service was noted as being almost totally absent, and, when it was available (only at the check in time), very expensive. In addition, it was problematic to find a parking space for a car and the price of the stay might be too expensive. However, parking problems cannot be seen as a negative issue in this setting as such space restrictions are connected to the morphological characteristics of the location.

Conclusion

This research, through a manual sentiment analysis of 130 customer reviews, sought to identify the perceptions of customers concerning the main innovative services offered by a new model of hospitality, the Albergo Diffuso. The empirical findings appear encouraging and highlight promising academic as well as managerial implications. The

Table 3
Example of Services With Negative Customers Perceptions

Negative Services	Relative Frequency	Examples of Services With Negative Customer Perceptions
Inadequate room facilities	37.69%	No air condition; Ventilation; Damp; Mostly smell; No Wi-Fi connection
Inadequate breakfast facilities	5.38%	Small breakfast room; Low quality of the food
Administrative problems	3.85%	Long check-in; Booking problems; Different reservation rooms; Previously payment; Communication problems

results are also in line with the pilot study conducted by Vallone and Veglio (2014), which aimed at understanding Italian tourists' perception about the quality of the services offered.

First, the present study opened up a new debate in the tourism literature by introducing a unit of analysis that has been relatively underexplored to date. In fact, pioneering research avenues should be opened in this direction, because of the well-documented dramatic changes of the touristic demand. Second, analysis of customer reviews, per our study's method, will help owners of an Albergo Diffuso to capture the real sentiments of customers by identifying which services subsequently should be improved on. In particular, in the Albergo Diffuso context, we found that excellence in terms of services is completely different from evaluations in respect of the traditional model. In the former, excellence is referred to in relation to innovative services such as friendly staff, integration between guests and the local community, cultural and artistic events, original management style, traditional rooms, and homemade food, while, in the latter case, excellence refers to traditional services such as, for instance, very comfortable rooms, powerful Wi-Fi connections, location of the hotel (close to the downtown area, close to transportation connections such as buses, trains, and undergrounds), and delicious continental breakfasts.

In addition, our research highlights the following strengths of the new model: (a) customers are incentivized to establish relationships not only with the other guests of the Albergo Diffuso but also with the local population to be fully integrated into the social context of the place as *quasiresidents*; (b) the management of the Albergo Diffuso is definitely original in the sense that the owner is like a "friend" who hosts the guests in a very familiar way; (c) customers can enjoy the full availability of a variety of options, from local products to cultural events; and (d) both the original atmosphere and the authenticity of the place make the Albergo Diffuso experience unique and inimitable. On the other hand, some issues were also identified: (a) customers classified the rooms as "inadequate"; (b) customers found the rooms to be small and sometimes not well cleaned; and (c) customers complained about administrative problems at the check-in time. These negative customer perceptions should be further investiga-

ted in future research, particularly those concerning communication problems between customers and staff, cleaning problems, and the misleading advertisements on the Internet. However, it should also be noted that Albergo Diffuso customers are both more flexible and more willing to accept negative situations such as steep stairs, small bedrooms and bathroom, no Internet connection, musty smells, and no windows in the room than customers who prefer to opt for a traditional hotel based on tangible services instead of intangible ones.

Summing up, this research tried to explain how the Albergo Diffuso model differs from that of traditional hotels by focusing attention on customer sentiment (perception) in relation to the services offered by this new concept of hospitality. We also suggested that new business models are emerging in the tourism sector due to the dramatic changes of the touristic demand that is increasingly oriented toward authenticity over comfort.

Future in-depth interviews might be developed with customers to better understand their feelings of satisfaction in relation to their stay within an Albergo Diffuso context as well as their expectations about the services that should be offered. In addition, future research might introduce the Albergo Diffuso as unit of analysis by focusing on its international dimensions: Is the Albergo Diffuso idea applicable in international contexts? To what extent has the Albergo Diffuso diffused in foreign markets? How different is the concept of service excellence at the international level to the national one? What are the main innovative services offered by an Albergo Diffuso in foreign markets?

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